

WILLIAM BLAKE & JACOB BOEHME: Imagination, Experience & the Limitations of Reason

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Abstract

William Blake and Jacob Boehme saw true imagination as rooted in living experience, as quite distinct from fantasy, and as such necessary for a fuller knowledge and understanding of reality. Both perceive the significant limitations of reason; that *of itself* it gives only a partial view, one that can limit and distort our understanding and experience. These limitations have too often extended to the study of Blake and Boehme. Through a close and imaginative engagement with their work, this paper looks at how both addressed the shortcomings of our usual, conditioned and habitual modes of perception and understanding, and how a different kind of engagement with and understanding of the world is necessary. Both saw just how constraining reason can be when it is too prominent and disconnected from our other vital faculties and capacities; how it can enclose and isolate, alienating us from both the world and ourselves. By contrast, for Boehme and Blake imagination is essential, a means of breaking out into that which is other than and beyond our habitual selves. It has a creative relationship with the world, one in which reality is not fixed and finished, but inexhaustible. As the mind expands, so does the world. This paper shows how for both visionaries, the creative embodied imagination places us more fully in existence – in ourselves and in the world – makes possible true reason, reveals all the profound potential that is too often unexplored and unrealised in us, and as such affords us a vital, living understanding of and relationship with the divine. It thus also demonstrates how vital imagination is to any study of William Blake and Jacob Boehme.

William Blake & Jacob Boehme: Imagination, * Experience & the Limitations of Reason

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This essay will examine how Jacob Boehme and William Blake understood and valued imagination, and how imagination is quite distinct from fantasy. Both men saw it as rooted in living experience, and as such necessary for a fuller knowledge and understanding of reality. For both, abstract reasoning alone gives only a partial view, one that can distort and limit our understanding and the world that we do experience. By contrast, the creative embodied imagination places us more fully in existence, in ourselves and in the world; it makes possible true Reason; it reveals all the profound potential that is too often unexplored and unrealised in us; and by doing so it affords us a vital living understanding of and relationship with the Divine.

While I am not here directly concerned with the extent of Boehme's influence on Blake, a few points are worth making in this regard. As with many of the forces that play a role in forming and directing a life, the nature of influence can be complex. Often it works subtly, gradually, and at a level beyond immediate recognition. Blake himself drew important distinctions between 'imitation' and 'invention', and wrote that 'The Man Either Painter or Philosopher who Learns or Acquires all he Knows from Others. Must be full of Contradictions'.¹ In this he was in agreement with Boehme, who said

I teach, write and speak out of what has been wrought in me. I have not scraped my teachings together out of histories and so made opinions. I have by God's grace obtained eyes of my own.²

It is through such assertions of independence that a sense of the value of tradition can become significant. Blake's and Boehme's view

* This essay is based on a lecture presented to the Temenos Academy, 13 July 2016.

1. *Annotations to Sir Joshua Reynolds's 'Discourses'*, from David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, rev. ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), p. 639. Citations from this edition below will use the siglum E followed by page number, e.g. 'E639'.

2. *The Epistles of Jacob Behmen*, trans. John Elliston (London: Matthew Simmons, 1649), 5:50.

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of tradition was one that regarded living personal experience as paramount. It was something to which one actively contributes. While certain critics have dismissed the importance of Blake's more esoteric sources, part of his art lay in the way he learned from, interpreted and created anew what lies at the core of such works. Certain of these sources are valuable precisely to the degree that they encourage autonomy and creativity in the individual.³

As Blake was relatively isolated in his own time—he lamented that his ‘lot’ was ‘to be left and neglected’ and to see his work ‘cried down as eccentricity and madness’⁴—it was important to him to find a living tradition, a community of vision and aspiration that provided support, guidance and inspiration. He believed that ‘Life consists of these Two Throwing off Error <and Knaves from our company> continually

& receiving Truth <or Wise Men into our Company> Continually’.⁵ Morton D. Paley highlights the need for some form of intellectual communion that confronted Blake:

Blake and some of his contemporaries faced the dilemma of the artist in what Matthew Arnold called ‘an epoch of concentration’. In such an age society does not provide the creative power with ‘a current of ideas in the highest degree animating and nourishing to the creative power’ characteristic of an ‘epoch of expansion’, but ‘books and reading may enable a man to construct a kind of semblance of it in his own mind, a world of knowledge and intelligence in which he may live and work’.⁶

Blake has written that ‘Rent from Eternal Brotherhood we die & are no more’.⁷

In writers such as Boehme, Blake found a source of support and encouragement, a bond and sense of community with kindred spirits throughout the centuries. In turn he was able through his art to keep alive and pass on the spirit that animated those like Boehme. The twentieth-century Russian philosopher and theologian Nicholas

3. For more on this question, see Kevin Fischer, *Converse in the Spirit: William Blake, Jacob Boehme and the Creative Spirit* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), pp. 22-43.

4. *A Descriptive Catalogue*, E538. 5. *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, E562.

6. Morton D. Paley, *The Continuing City: William Blake's Jerusalem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 85; see Matthew Arnold, ‘The Function of Criticism in the Present Time’ in *Essays, Literary and Critical* (London: J. M. Dent, 1906; repr. 1938), p. 5.

7. *The Four Zoas*, Night 3, p. 41:9, E328.

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Berdyaev, whose own thought is thoroughly Behmenist in its outlook, observes that

the man who is seeking the spiritual life must join himself to all those who have participated in the development of the knowledge of the spirit in history. That is why a philosophy of the spirit inevitably contains within itself a traditional element and presupposes fellowship with tradition.⁸

Henry Crabb Robinson recorded in his diary a conversation he had with Blake in 1824, in the poet's last few years, writing that 'Jacob Boehme was spoken of as a divinely inspired man'.⁹ Although a brief statement and one of only three existing direct acknowledgements of Boehme's influence on and importance to Blake,¹⁰ this is significant praise from someone who had devoted his life to the revelation of the divine in man, and who believed that 'Inspiration & Vision was . . . & now is & I hope will always Remain my Element my Eternal Dwelling Place'.¹¹ Although Blake was born more than 130 years after Boehme's death—Boehme lived between 1575 and 1624, and Blake between 1757 and 1827—they were kindred spirits, for whom an active spiritual imagination was vital.

Their views of existence and the world, and of the spiritual itself, are unconventional and, in many respects, difficult to grasp. Boehme's God, for instance, occupies no place or space, does not exist in time, cannot be thought of, and is spoken of by him as the primal Nothing. In a similar heterodox spirit, Blake wrote: 'Seek not thy heavenly father

. . . beyond the skies/There Chaos dwells & ancient Night',¹² and 'The IMAGINATION . . . is God himself'.¹³ Both were opposed to a literal belief in an overseeing God in the heavens. For them such a view reified the divine. As Boehme's follower William Law stated of his writings, 'there is nothing that is supernatural, however mysterious'.¹⁴ From another point of view, for Boehme and Blake everything was supernatural or

8. Nicholas Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, trans. Oliver Fielding Clarke (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955), p. 19.

9. *Diaries, Reminiscences, and Correspondences of Henry Crabb Robinson*, ed. Thomas Sadler, 3 vols (London: Macmillan, 1869), ii.305.

10. The others are *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* pls. 22–3, E42–3; and *Letters*, E707–8.

11. *Annotations to Reynolds*, E660–61. 12. *Milton* pl. 20:32–3, E114. 13. *Laocoön*, E723.

14. *Selected Mystical Writings of William Law*, ed. Stephen Hobhouse (London: C. W. Daniel, 1938), p. 173.

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spiritualised. It is quite possible to have entirely rejected belief in the God of orthodox religion and nonetheless to perceive the divine as Blake and Boehme apprehended it. In fact, this can be as good a point as any from which to start in attempting to understand the living, if elusive, spirit that animates their works.

Throughout his writings Boehme stresses that he ‘may happen not to be understood clearly enough by the desirous Reader’, and that he ‘shall be as one that is altogether dumb to the unenlightened’.¹⁵ In the *Aurora* he states that when the active spiritual imagination is truly alive in him, ‘I *absolutely* and infallibly believe, know and see . . . ; yet not in the flesh, but in the spirit, in the *impulse* and motion of God . . .

.. Neither is this my *Natural will*, that I could do it by my own small ability; for if the Spirit were withdrawn from me, then I could neither know nor understand *my own Writings*.¹⁶ This acknowledgement of the limitations of our usual, often conditioned and habitual, modes of perception and understanding is essential. A different kind of engagement with and understanding of the world, and of existence in it, is necessary.

Both Boehme and Blake saw how reason can be limiting when it is too prominent, and too disconnected from our other vital faculties and capacities. Boehme wrote of his works that ‘a Man’s Reason, without the light of God, cannot come into the Ground [of them], it is impossible, let his wit be ever so high and subtle, it apprehends but as it were the Shadow of it in a Glass’.¹⁷ As Blake wrote in *Jerusalem*, when ‘the Reasoning Power in Man’ is ‘separated/From Imagination,’ it encloses ‘itself as in steel, in a Ratio/Of the Things of Memory’.¹⁸

In his recent and very important book on the workings of the left and right hemispheres of the brain, Iain McGilchrist casts light on this. Imagination is primarily at work in the right hemisphere, while rationalism has a tendency to dominate in the left. McGilchrist writes, ‘in almost every case, what is new must first be present in the right hemisphere, before it can come into focus to the left.’ It ‘is only . . . the

15. *Concerning the Three Principles of the Divine Essence*, trans. John Sparrow (London: Matthew Simmons, 1648; repr. Chicago: Yogi Publication Society, 1909), 5:1.

16. *The Aurora*, trans. John Sparrow (London: John Streeter, 1656), 3:110, 112.

17. *The Clavis: or, An Explanation of Some Principal Points and Expressions in His Writings*, 2; in *The Works of Jacob Behmen, the Teutonic Philosopher, with Figures Illustrating his Principles, left by the Reverend William Law, M.A.*, trans. John Sparrow, John Elliston and Humphrey Blunden; ed. George Ward and Thomas Langcake, 4 vols (London: M. Richardson, 1764–8), vol .2.

18. *Jerusalem* pl. 74:10–12, E229.

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right hemisphere that is in direct contact with the embodied living world: the left hemisphere is by comparison a virtual, bloodless affair.' As a result, it

deals with what it [already] knows . . . The difficulty is . . . that once we have . . . decided what the world is going to reveal, we are unlikely to get beyond it . . . Whatever . . . the left hemisphere deals with is bound to become familiar all too quickly . . . This process eventually becomes so automatic that we do not so much experience the world as experience our representation of the world. The world is no longer 'present' to us, but 're-presented', a virtual world, a copy that exists in conceptual form in the mind.

Ultimately, the mind can become 'disconnected from everything that is outside it.' And then, to the 'Reasoning Power', 'the world . . . becomes merely *things* [that are] seen'.¹⁹

As Blake saw, the 'Reasoning Power' is an 'Abstract objecting power, that Negatives every thing'.²⁰ He wrote of those who are isolated and alienated by it: 'Beyond the bounds of their own self their senses cannot penetrate'.²¹ 'He who sees the Infinite in all things sees God. He who sees the Ratio only sees himself only.'²² For all its claims to be our primary means of gaining access to reality, this 'Reasoning Power' can therefore distance us from full, living knowledge and understanding; and the more it functions in isolation, in an enclosed 'virtual' world, the more it can slip into solipsism and fantasy. As Blake acknowledged of himself in a letter to Thomas Butts, 'my Abstract folly hurries me often away while I am at work, carrying me over Mountains & Valleys which are not Real in a Land of Abstraction where the Spectres of the Dead wander'.²³

Blake and Boehme both saw imagination as something profoundly different from fantasy. Contrary to common conception, this imagination is not about make-believe, the creation of the fantastical, nor is it wish-fulfilment. Blake and Boehme regarded it as an essential part of life, a means of breaking out of the 'dull round' of the 'ratio' of abstract reason, of the already known, and through to that which

19. Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010; repr. 2012), pp. 40, 199–200, 40, 163, 38, 93, 393. See also Roderick Tweedy, *The God of the Left Hemisphere: Blake, Bolte Taylor, & the Myth of Creation*, (London: Karnac Books, 2013)

20. *Jerusalem* pl. 10:13–14, E153. 21. *Four Zoas*, Night 6, p. 70:12, E347.

22. *There is No Natural Religion*, E3. 23. *Letters*, E716.

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is other than, and beyond ourselves. It is a means of putting us more in touch with—and more *into*—the world, acting as a bridge between the experiencing individual and that which is experienced. It helps *root* us in living experience. As Boehme put it, ‘the outward Essence reacheth not the inward in the soul, but only by the imagination’.²⁴ Imagination can therefore provide a fuller, truer form of knowledge and understanding. As Evelyn Underhill perceived, ‘True Mysticism is active and practical, not passive and theoretical. It is an organic life-process, a something which the whole self does; not something as to which the intellect holds an opinion.’²⁵

It is notable that by contrast with many mystics and visionaries, Boehme and Blake accorded great significance to the activities of the senses. Blake’s Isaiah declares in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, ‘I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover’d the infinite in every thing’.²⁶ Envisioning an imaginative elevation of the senses and emotions that manifests the eternal and divine, Boehme speaks of the ‘harmony of hearing, seeing, feeling, tasting and smelling’ that is ‘the true intellective life’.²⁷ When the rational faculty is integrated as it should be with all the faculties, *true* Reason prevails. Boehme and Blake are visionaries. Perception lies at the core of their work, as the imaginative engagement of all the senses. The *body* is therefore a necessary part of the whole self. Embodied experience is central. Blake argued in the *Marriage* that ‘Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that calld Body is a portion of Soul disernd by the five Senses’.²⁸ This is in accord with Boehme, who saw that without a body the ‘Spirit is void . . . there is no understanding . . . the spirit itself does not subsist without a body’.²⁹

While imagination helps place us more fully in the world as it is, its relationship with that world is at the same time creative. While Boehme does not fit conventional ideas of what constitutes an artist, he can be seen as creative in a broader sense. Blake understood that true Art is a spiritual activity, a creative life that every individual should pursue: ‘The whole Business of Man Is The Arts & All Things Common.’ As

24. *Forty Questions Concerning the Soul . . . Answered* 11:9–11; in *Works*, vol. 2.

25. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness* (London: Methuen, 1911), p. 81.

26. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* pl. 12, E38.

27. *Mysterium Magnum or An Exposition of the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John Sparrow (London, 1654); repr. ed. C. J. Barker, 2 vols (London: John M. Watkins, 1965), 5:14.

28. *Marriage* pl. 4, E34. 29. *The Threelfold Life of Man* 4:5; in *Works*, vol. 2.

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he also writes in *The Laocoön*, ‘Christianity is Art’: ‘A Poet a Painter a Musician an Architect: the Man/Or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian.’ This view unites the truly creative with Christ, for ‘Jesus & his Apostles & Disciples were all Artists’.³⁰ While Boehme’s visionary scheme—the emergence of the divine from the unfathomable Abyss, the activities of the seven properties and three principles, and so on—is too complex and interwoven to discuss in detail here, it can be noted that in this scheme he gives the creative spirit individual, personal form. His visionary system is not a set of ideas, a logical construct; nor is it a simple or direct description of the movements of divinity; nor is it a statement of what divinity is or is not—rather, it is an *imaginative* medium for approaching the divine. In this sense it can be argued that in his work Boehme created his own individual art form. As he wrote, ‘A true Christian is a continual making word in God’s voice’. His vision is dynamic and imaginative, and in keeping with his view that reality is not fixed, finished, and unchanging, and thus capable of being fully and finally understood and explained. Rather, it is ongoing, evolving, ever-expanding. As he wrote of the nature of spiritual enquiry in the *Aurora*:

the Being of God, is like a Wheel, wherein many wheeles are made *one in another*, upward, downward, crosse-ways, and yet continually- turn all of them together . . . When a man beholdeth the *wheel*, he highly marvaileth at it, and cannot *at once* in its turning learn to conceive and *apprehend* it: but the more he beholdeth the wheel, the more he learneth its Form or frame; and the more he learneth, the greater Longing he hath to the Wheel; for he continually seeth somewhat, that is more and more wonderfull, so that a man can neither behold it or learn it *Enough*.³¹

Reality is inexhaustible, and, when imaginatively engaged with, continually reveals new possibilities. In accord with this, Boehme’s writings embrace and nurture a progressive, ever-deepening and creative understanding. Blake’s work similarly represents a new development and creation of spiritual understanding. Both stress the need for each individual to encounter and interpret anew the truths that, in Blake’s words, ‘reside in the human breast’.³² Boehme too speaks of this: ‘One always understands otherwise than another, according

30. *Laocoön*, E273–4. 31. *Aurora* 21:64–65. 32. *Marriage* pl. 11, E38.

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as each is endued with the Wisdom; and so also he apprehends and explains it'.³³ From the liberating possibilities of this understanding, Blake's character Los asserts, 'I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans/I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create'.³⁴ Accordingly, both visionaries' works are created with a view, in Blake's words, to opening

... the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes
Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought: into Eternity Ever
expanding in the Bosom of God, the Human Imagination³⁵

The eye of imagination not only looks outward, as it were, and so places us more firmly in the world around us, but also within. In many respects, Boehme's and Blake's writings provide a profound insight into the workings of the human mind. Their work may be seen, as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Robin Waterfield have said of Boehme, as 'esoteric psychology', or 'psychology of the depths'.³⁶ That which is other than ourselves, beyond the 'ratio' of our 'Reasoning Power', is also within us, and imagination is an important means of putting us in touch with it. Vitally, both Boehme and Blake understood that there are profound capacities latent in each individual that for the most part remain unexplored and unrealised: immense possibilities that are part of possibilities that are naturally inherent within us, our birthright. Boehme writes, 'In *Man* lyes all whatsoever the sun shines upon, or Heaven contains, as also Hell and all the Deep; he is an inexhaustible Fountain, that cannot be drawn dry'.³⁷ In the same spirit, Blake wrote that Joshua Reynolds

Thinks that Man Learns all that he Knows I say on the Contrary That Man Brings All that he has or Can have Into the World with him. Man is Born like a Garden ready Planted & Sown.³⁸

In response to Reynolds's assertion that 'The mind is but a barren soil; a soil which is soon exhausted, and will produce no crop', Blake adds:

33. *The Confessions of Jacob Boehme*, ed. W. Scott Palmer (London: Methuen, 1920), p. 110.

34. *Jerusalem* pl. 10:20–21, E153. 35. *Ibid.*, pl. 5:18–20, E147.

36. Robin Waterfield, introduction to *Jacob Boehme: Essential Readings* (Wellingborough: Crucible, 1989), p. 27: 'We may say, as did Schleiermacher, that Boehme's writings are in fact "esoteric psychology" or psychology of the depths.'

37. *Of the Election of Grace* 13:79; in *Works*, vol. 4. 38. *Annotations to Reynolds*, E656.

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The Mind that could have produced this Sentence must have been [of] a Pitiful a Pitiable Imbecillity. I always thought that the Human Mind was the most Prolific of All Things & Inexhaustible.³⁹

Boehme distinguishes between a lower form of understanding that is bound, as he put it, to the ‘natural life, whose ground lies in a temporal beginning and end’, and a higher, living, imaginative knowledge that is able to ‘enter the supernatural ground where God is understood’.⁴⁰ This distinction also appears in Blake, in ‘the Mighty difference’ he discerned between a mental process that is limited to the ‘Vanities of Time & Space’, seeing only itself in the shadowy ‘Vegetable Glass of Nature’, and the ‘Eternal . . . Worlds of Vision’ revealed in the *creative* knowledge of ‘Spiritual Mystery’.⁴¹ As he wrote, ‘Allegory addressd to the Intellectual powers while it is altogether hidden from the Corporeal Understanding is My Definition of the Most Sublime Poetry’.⁴² The intellect of which Blake here speaks is imaginative and intuitive.

Blake writes in *Jerusalem* that the sublime riches of the inner life are ‘Shadowy to those who dwell not in them, meer possibilities:/But to those who enter into them they seem the only substances’.⁴³ A great deal of Blake’s and Boehme’s work is addressed to the ways in which human beings are shut off from awareness of all the potential that lies within them. As Blake states, ‘man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern’.⁴⁴ In *The Book of Urizen*, he writes of those who cannot ‘rise at will/In the infinite void, but’ are ‘bound down/To earth by their narrowing perceptions’.⁴⁵ In *Europe*, the faculties of such persons are ‘Turn’d outward, barr’d and petrify’d against the infinite’.⁴⁶ Both Blake and Boehme equate this exile with the Fall of Man. In *Mysterium Magnum*, Boehme states that Adam ‘lost his clear pure steady eyes and sight, which was from the divine essence’, and that this essence ‘remained in man, but it was as ‘twere a nothing to man in its life; for it stood hidden’.⁴⁷

Disembodied rationalism is a major source of this loss. As the divine spark that is in fallen man is hidden, Blake saw that ‘the Reasoning Spectre/Stands between the Vegetable Man & his Immortal

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Six Theosophic Points and Other Writings*, trans. John Rolleston Earle (New York: Knopf, 1920; repr. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958), ‘Theoscopia’ 1:2.

41. *Vision*, E555. 42. *Letters*, E730. 43. *Jerusalem* pl. 13:64–5, E158.

44. *Marriage* pl.14, E39. 45. *The Book of Urizen* pl. 27:45-7, E83.

46. *Europe* pl. 10:15, E63. 47. *Mysterium Magnum* 18:33, 20:26.

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Imagination'.⁴⁸ The Spectre is 'a false Body: an Incrustation over my Immortal/Spirit; a Selfhood'.⁴⁹ It declares in *Jerusalem*:

I am your Rational Power . . . & that Human Form You call
Divine, is but a Worm seventy inches long
That creeps forth in a night & is dried in the morning sun.⁵⁰

Worldly religion can also shut the individual off from the inner life: 'There is a Grain of Sand . . . that Satan cannot find/Nor can his Watch Fiends find it . . .'; it 'has many Angles' and

every angle is a lovely heaven
But should the Watch Fiends find it, they would call it Sin
And lay its Heavens & their inhabitants in blood of punishment.⁵¹

Boehme complained that 'Our divines set themselves Hand and Foot with Might and Main, with their utmost Endeavour, by Persecution and Reproach . . . [and say] that man must not [dare to] search into the deep Grounds what God is; Men must not search nor curiously pry into the Deity'.⁵² And so, as Boehme adds, 'the Temple of Christ was turned into Temples made of Stones, and out of the Testimony of the Holy Ghost a Worldly Law was made. Then the Holy Ghost spoke no more freely, but he must speak according to their Laws . . . and so the Temple of Christ in Man's Knowledge became very obscure'.⁵³

As a result, Boehme believed that all too often the Antichrist had been mistaken for God, that there are, in his words, 'two . . . Churches upon the earth; one which seeketh only . . . the outward God . . . therein . . . lodgeth the Serpent's child. The other, which seeketh the Virgin-child and God's kingdom . . . must suffer itself to be persecuted.' If 'the virgin's child . . . be not manifest . . . the devil is'.⁵⁴ Blake made essentially the same argument in *Jerusalem*:

Man must & will have Some Religion; if he has not the Religion of Jesus, he will have the Religion of Satan . . . calling the Prince of this World, God; and destroying all who do not worship Satan under the Name God.⁵⁵

48. *Jerusalem* pl. 32:23-4, E178. 49. *Milton* pl. 40: 35-6, E142.

50. *Jerusalem* pl. 29:5-7, E175. 51. *Ibid.*, pl. 37:15-20, E183.

52. *Concerning the Three Principles* 3:5-6. 53. *Ibid.*, 26:27.

54. *Mysterium Magnum* 26: 25-6. 55. *Jerusalem* 'To the Deists', pl. 52, E201.

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Seeing a connection between the false God of worldly religion and the God of disembodied rationalism, he asks in *The Book of Ahania*, ‘Shall we worship this Demon of smoke/. . . this abstract non-entity/ This cloudy God’.⁵⁶ Boehme’s writings supply the answer, that the ‘Spirit of Christ in God, *will not be bound* to any Laws’,⁵⁷ for Man in Paradise ‘had no Law, but only the Law of the *Imagination*’.⁵⁸ He adds, ‘God’s Spirit is not to be judged by reason’.⁵⁹

With this in view, Boehme and Blake understood that each individual should, in Boehme’s words, ‘seek and find himself . . . for all things are generated out of imagination . . . and every imagination reaps its own work which it has wrought’.⁶⁰ For him the spiritual life is centred in inner, living personal experience: ‘thou must thyself be the way, the understanding must be born in thee . . . thou must enter into it, so that the understanding . . . may be opened to thee’.⁶¹ Émile Boutroux observes of Boehme’s vision: ‘A living method, alone, enables us to penetrate into the mysteries of life. Being, alone, knows being.’⁶² Being, alone, knows being. This is an essential point. Ultimate authority resides in the infinite potential within the individual. Boehme asks, ‘How should you not have Power and Authority to speak of God, who is your Father, of whose essence you are?’⁶³ When

the Heaven, and the Birth of the Elements are spoken of, it is not a Thing afar off, or that is distant from us, that is spoken of; but we speak of Things that are done in our Body and Soul; and there is nothing nearer us than this birth, for we live and move therein, as in the House of our Mother; and when we speak of Heaven, we speak of our native Country.⁶⁴

Blake wrote out of this ‘Country’:

in your own Bosom you bear your Heaven
And Earth, & all you behold, tho it appears Without it is Within

56. *The Book of Ahania* pl. 2:10–12, E84. 57. *Threefold Life of Man* 3:67.

58. *The Treatise of the Incarnation* I.4:60; in *Works*, vol. 2. 59. *Election of Grace* 12:70.

60. *Signatura Rerum, or The Signature of All Things*, trans. John Elliston (London: Gyles Calvert, 1651); repr. in *The Signature of all Things and Other Writings* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1969), 15:41.

61. *Ibid.*, 14:1.

62. Émile Boutroux, *Historical Studies in Philosophy*, trans. Fred Rothwell (London: Macmillan, 1912; repr. Port Washington NY: Kennicat Press, 1970), p. 180.

63. *Concerning the Three Principles* 4:7. 64. *Ibid.*, 7:7.

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In your Imagination of which this World of Mortality is but a Shadow.⁶⁵

As Boehme understood,

The Spirit that is in us, which one Man inherits from the other, that was breathed out of Eternity into *Adam*, that same Spirit has seen it all, and in the Light of God it sees it still; and there is nothing that is afar off, or Unsearchable.⁶⁶

Again, this ‘Spirit’ is naturally inherent within us. And knowing this, Boehme asks, ‘Where will you seek God? In the Deep above the Stars? You will not be able to find him there. Seek him in your Heart.’ This ‘Birth must be done within you: The Heart, or the Son of God must arise in the birth in your Life; and then the Saviour Christ is your faithful Shepherd, and you are in Him, and He in you’.⁶⁷ The ‘Saviour Christ’ declares at the beginning of Blake’s *Jerusalem*, ‘I am not a God afar off, I am a brother and friend;/Within your bosoms I reside, and you reside in me’.⁶⁸

Looking outwards and inwards, the imagination explores the relationship between the individual and the divine. Boehme states, ‘You must elevate your sense or mind in the *Spirit* if you intend to understand and *apprehend it*’.⁶⁹ Both visionaries sought to awaken the mind from its usual, often habitual modes of understanding and perception, to a real and living awareness of the limited terms in which life can too often be lived. One such limitation is the assumption that we simply see things as they are, that our eye faithfully and fully sees what is there in the world, when in fact reality as we understand it is filtered through us. Again, both Boehme and Blake believed that life is not given and fixed. Man is not merely a *tabula rasa* on which reality writes itself. As Blake stated; ‘As a man is So he Sees’.⁷⁰ In Boehme’s words, ‘as the spirit is, so is the essence’: the essence here being that which is produced by the perceiving, and thus determining, ‘Spirit’.⁷¹ The responsibility lies with the individual. When cut off too much from our imagination and the profound possibilities within us, the world that is seen and experienced shrinks, as Blake saw: ‘If Percep-tive- Organs vary: Objects of Perception

65. *Jerusalem* pl. 71:17–19, E225. 66. *Concerning the Three Principles* 7:6.

67. *Ibid.*, 4:8–9. 68. *Jerusalem* pl. 4:18–19, E146. 69. *Aurora* 8:43. 70. *Letters*, E702.

71. *Treatise of the Incarnation* II.2:23.

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seem to vary:/If the Perceptive Organs close: their Objects seems to close also'.⁷² With this, reductionism is born, 'comprehending great, as very small'.⁷³ Exiled from the best part of his inner nature, man shrinks accordingly. Blake repeatedly writes of his characters, 'they became what they beheld'.

Conversely, when the imagination is properly at work in the outer and inner worlds, both come more to life. As Boehme declared, the soul is 'powerful . . . it can by magic alter all things whatsoever they are in the outward world's essence, and introduce them into another essence'.⁷⁴ Every 'Man is free, and is as a God to himself'.⁷⁵ And 'God is *no* Creature, also *no* Maker, but a Spirit and an *Opener*'.⁷⁶ Blake understood this: 'there is no Limit of Expansion! there is no Limit of Translucence'.⁷⁷ To put this in another way, through imagination we experience more; and *what* we experience—and so understand—grows, expands. Again, imagination puts us more in touch with — embeds us in—*more* of reality, and we appreciate better that it is inexhaustible, and ever-expanding. Vital to this is the understanding that the outward world and the inner are not separate, but involved in a dynamic and profound interrelationship. Existence is not finally reducible to the fixed categories of subject and object. For Boehme and Blake the spiritual life is not isolated within the individual, separate from an external world that remains impassive and untouched by it, nor is it mere solipsism. They perceived that the spirit cannot truly be apprehended as either an object of knowledge or a merely subjective state. It lives through the interplay of man's apparently separate internal and external worlds, enabling us to realise that, as Blake saw, 'everything that lives is Holy'.⁷⁸

There is a spirit of dynamic paradox at work here, namely that the divine *is* and *is not* at work in the world. Boehme writes of this in *Treatise of the Incarnation*: 'God dwells not in this World in the Outward Principle, but in the *Inward*; he dwells indeed in the Place of this world, but this world apprehendeth him not.' Similarly, 'Paradise springs no more through the Earth, for it is become a Mystery, and yet is *continually there* . . . It is *in* this World, and yet is *out* of this World.'⁷⁹ Approaching this from another angle, Boehme writes in *The Signature of All Things*, in one of his better known passages, that

72. *Jerusalem* pl. 30:55–6, E177. 73. *Ibid.*, pl. 49:37, E198.

74. *Mysterium Magnum* 17:43. 75. *Aurora* 18:47.

76. *Treatise of the Incarnation* I.5.85. 77. *Jerusalem* pl. 42:35, E189.

78. *Marriage* pl. 27, E45. 79. *Treatise of the Incarnation* I.2:43, 6:84, 86.

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The whole outward visible World with all its being is a signature of the inward spiritual world . . . This [inward] world has manifested itself . . . with this visible world, as a visible likeness, so that the spiritual being might be manifest in a corporeal comprehensive essence . . . the internal holds the external before it as a glass, wherein it beholds itself . . . the external is its signature.⁸⁰

In a similar vein Blake argued, in a passage touched on above, that

This World <of Imagination> is Infinite & Eternal whereas the world of Generation or Vegetation is Finite & <for a small moment > Temporal[.] There Exist in that Eternal World the Permanent Realities of Every Thing which we see reflected in this Vegetable Glass of Nature.⁸¹

In other words, the external reflects the inner life back to itself. Boehme wrote, ‘Without the light of Nature there is no understanding of divine mysteries’.⁸² In the same spirit, Blake responded to Lavater’s statement that ‘Whatever is visible is the vessel or veil of the invisible past, present, future—as man penetrates to this more, or perceives it less, he raises or depresses his dignity of being’; declaring it ‘A vision of the Eternal Now’.⁸³ The outward world is a mirror of the great omnipotence and omniscience of God. ‘To the Eyes of the Man of Imagination Nature is Imagination itself.’⁸⁴

In this sublime interrelationship, the inner spiritual life is primary. Boehme believed that in Paradise the first man ‘saw with pure eyes . . . The inward man, that is the inward eye, saw through the outward.’⁸⁵ This pure and ‘inward eye’ looks out at the end of Blake’s *A Vision of the Last Judgment*: ‘I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight[.] I look thro it & not with it.’⁸⁶ The inner spiritual self looks out and sees through the outer. When this imaginative eye is engaged with the world, that which has been drained of life by habit and over-familiarity, by the ‘ratio’, the ‘dull round’ of what we already know, is seen and experienced anew, as if for the very first time. Blake’s much-quoted maxim, ‘If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would

80. *Signatura Rerum* 9:1–3. 81. *Vision*, E555. 82. *Epistles* 4:13.

83. *Annotations to Lavater’s ‘Aphorisms on Man’*, E592. 84. *Letters*, E702.

85. *Mysterium Magnum* 18:13. 86. *Vision*, E566.

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appear as it is: infinite',⁸⁷ clearly echoes the propositions that appear repeatedly in Boehme's writings; so much so as to suggest that he was consciously reaffirming Boehme's exhortations:

If . . . thy Eyes were opened, then, in *that* very place, where thou standest, sittest, or lyest: thou shouldst see the glorious Countenance or Face of God and the whole heavenly Gate.⁸⁸

Paradise

is not in this World, yet as it were swallowed up in the Mystery; but it is not altered in itself, it is only withdrawn from our Sight and our Source; for if our Eyes were opened, we should see it.⁸⁹

Through imagination we experience a far greater sense of the full reality of existence—that is, we truly see, feel and know how astonishing, how utterly extraordinary it is to be alive in the world. And as the outward world is not shut off from the imaginative and creative life of the inward, the reality of the world comes more to life. As 'every thing that lives is Holy', the outward world 'reflects back' the life of the spirit. In Blake's poem *Europe*, a Fairy evokes this living interplay. The narrator asks, 'What is the material world, and is it dead?' Having sung of 'the eternal world that ever groweth', the Fairy promises 'I'll . . . shew you all alive/The world, when every particle of dust breathes forth its joy'.⁹⁰ The same vision is expressed in *Auguries of Innocence*:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
 And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
 Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
 And Eternity in an hour.⁹¹

As Boehme perceived, 'if a man be born of God, he may know in every Spire of Grass his Creator in whom he lives'.⁹² This is a perfect expression of the dynamic unity of the outward and inward, and of the necessity of being imaginatively alive to the unique and individual: alive, in Blake's favoured phrase, to the 'minute particulars' of life.

87. *Marriage* pl.14, E39. 88. *Aurora* 10:101. 89. *Forty Questions* 39:1.

90. *Europe* pl. iii:4, 13, 17–18, E60. 91. *Auguries of Innocence* lines 1–4, E490.

92. *Concerning the Three Principles* 8:9.

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Again, ‘every thing that lives’ in the outward world ‘reflects back’, and is thus necessary to that which lives in the inward. In *Jerusalem* Blake writes of the ‘Living Creatures’ who declare:

Let the Indefinite be explored . . .

Let all Indefinites be . . .

melted in the Furnaces of Affliction . . .

For Art & Science cannot exist but in minutely organizd Particulars And not

in generalizing Demonstrations of the Rational Power. The Infinite alone

resides in Definite & Determinate Identity . . .⁹³

In Boehme’s words, without ‘this Birth or Substance there could be nothing’.⁹⁴ He saw the necessity of individual form, stating: ‘Every Spirit without a body is empty, and knows not itself, and therefore every spirit desires a Body for its food and for its habitation’.⁹⁵ Boehme and Blake worked in response to the dangers they perceived in formlessness and abstraction. In *The Book of Urizen*, Blake’s character Los is confronted with the ‘void’, the ‘soul-shudd’ring vacuum’; is ‘affrighted/At the formless immeasurable death’.⁹⁶ Blake wrote in *Jerusalem* of the ‘Abstract, which is a Negation/Not only of the Substance from which it is derived/A murderer of its own Body: but also a murderer/Of every Divine Member’⁹⁷—that is, of the minute particulars of existence. In accord with the importance, as Blake expressed it, of ‘putting off the Indefinite/Into most holy forms of Thought’,⁹⁸ Boehme wrote in *The Signature of All Things*:

A true Christian is in the spirit a Christian, and in continual exercise to bring forth its own form, not only with words in sound and show, but in the power of the work, as a visible palpable form . . . as a servant of God in God’s deeds of wonder.⁹⁹

He states in the *Clavis* that ‘the spiritual Substance must needs bring itself into a material ground, wherein it may . . . figure and form itself’.¹⁰⁰ This ‘form’ or ‘body’ is essential for manifestation, not least—and in fact most importantly—for the manifestation of the divine to man. It is as the ‘Glass’ (or mirror) of the outward world in which the inner

93. *Jerusalem* pl. 55:55–64, E205. 94. *Concerning the Three Principles* 2:12.

95. *Forty Questions* 4:1. 96. *Book of Urizen* pl. 3:4–5, E70; pl. 7:8–9, E74.

97. *Jerusalem* pl. 10:10–13, E153. 98. *Milton* pl. 28:4–5, E125.

99. *Signatura Rerum* 15:38. 100. *Clavis* 167

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spirit sees and finds itself. Creative embodied imagination is key to the realisation of the divine, for, Boehme asserted, ‘we must use *Similitudes*, if we intend to speak of God’.¹⁰¹ As he wrote of fallen man, and specifically of imagination and its possibilities, ‘in God’s holiness it cannot take hold; for the will was rent off from that; therefore there must now be a similitude wherein the imagination of the human nature may take hold’.¹⁰² Throughout his own works Blake endeavours to manifest ‘the Divine Image’.¹⁰³ He wrote:

Man can have no idea of anything greater than Man as a cup cannot contain more than its capaciousness . . . Think of a white cloud. as being holy you cannot love it but think of a holy man within the cloud love springs up in your thought, for to think of holiness distinct from man is impossible to the affections.¹⁰⁴

Imagination creates the bridge between, makes possible the awareness of the interrelationship between, the human and the divine. Blake’s belief that ‘God only Acts & Is, in existing beings or Men’ is also in Boehme, who argued that God ‘hath manifested himself by the externall World in a similitude, that the spirit might see it selfe in the Being essentially, and not so onely, but that the Creature likewise might contemplate and behold the being of God in the Figure, and know it’.¹⁰⁵ The similitude appears in both Boehme’s and Blake’s works. Through it, Boehme explores the relationship between God and man. He saw that he ‘was to form and fashion holy figures and images with my mouth and expression; even as You, O eternal God, have formed and framed everything through Your holy Name’.¹⁰⁶ The relationship between man and the divine may thus be said, with qualifications, to be one of interdependence.

To elaborate on this, Boehme regarded the outward world as ‘a formed Model or Platform, wherein the Great Mind of Divine Manifestation beholds itself in a Time, and plays with itself’.¹⁰⁷ Boehme identified that in which the ‘Great Mind . . . beholds itself’ as Sophia,

101. *Aurora* 3:29.

102. *A Treatise of Christ’s Testaments, Baptism, and the Supper* 2:33; in *Works*, vol. 4.

103. *Songs of Innocence*, E12–13.

104. *Annotations to Swedenborg’s ‘Divine Love and Divine Wisdom’*, E603.

105. *Marriage* pl.16, E40; *Epistles* 5:14.

106. ‘On Holy Prayer’, in *The Way to Christ*, trans. Peter Erb (New York: Paulist Press, 1978),

107. p. 53.

108. *Mysterium Magnum* 7:19.

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the mirror of Wisdom. Sophia is the ‘Glass’ in which, looking through and not with the eye, we see the divine:

She is the *Substantiality* of the spirit, which the Spirit of God putteth on as a Garment, whereby he manifesteth himself, or else his form would not be known: for she is the Spirit’s Corporeity, and though she is not a corporeal palpable substance, like as Men, yet she is substantial and visible, but the Spirit is *not* substantial. For we Men can, in Eternity, see no more of the Spirit of God, but only the *Glance* of the Majesty; and his glorious *power* we feel in us, for it is our life

... But we know the Virgin in all her Heavenly Similitudes or Images [while] she giveth a body to all fruits, she is not the Corporeity of the fruit, but the Ornament and Luster.¹⁰⁸

Blake’s Jerusalem, his own Sophia, appears in a similar light:

In Great Eternity, every particular Form gives forth or Emanates Its own
peculiar Light, & the Form is the Divine Vision

And the Light is his Garment This is Jerusalem in every Man.¹⁰⁹

For Blake and Boehme, the similitude ultimately directs the imagination to the ‘Divine Image’, Christ. As Boehme states in *Mysterium Magnum*, the ‘soul cannot see God, save only in the new-born image: only through and in the virgin Sophia... in the name Jesus’.¹¹⁰ None ‘can see God unless God first becomes Man in him’. Where Boehme speaks of the ‘love play’ of the imagination in the mirror of Sophia, Blake writes of ‘the sports of Wisdom in the Human Imagination/Which is the Divine Body of the Lord Jesus’.¹¹¹ The ‘image’ of this ‘Divine Body’ is a ‘form’ in which the human imagination can ‘take hold’. As Blake saw, ‘All Things are comprehended in their Eternal Forms in the Divine body of the Saviour’.¹¹² The image of Christ’s Incarnation ‘reflects back’ to us our own embodied nature, and the inexhaustible spiritual potential within us; a potential that Blake and Boehme locate in Christ. As Boehme wrote, ‘the most inward Ground in Man is . . . Christ’.¹¹³ The ‘Human Soul is a Spark out of . . . the divine’.¹¹⁴ For both visionaries, imagination unites us with Christ. Again, as the figure of the Saviour

108. *Threefold Life of Man* 5:50–52. 109. *Jerusalem* pl. 54:1–3, E203.

110. *Mysterium Magnum* 52:10. 111. *Milton* pl. 3:3–4, E96. 112. *Vision*, E555.

113. *Election of Grace* 7:98. 114. *Mysterium Magnum*, ‘The Author’s Preface’: 9.

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says at the beginning of *Jerusalem*, as already quoted in part above:

I am in you and you in me, mutual in love divine . . .
 I am not a God afar off, I am a brother and friend;
 Within your bosoms I reside, and you reside in me:
 Lo! We are One.¹¹⁵

Blake's and Boehme's work is directed towards the revelation of the unitive and indwelling Christ who, as Boehme believed, 'brought the Divine Image into . . . the Soul: And this is done by the Imagination'.¹¹⁶ At the same time, as the outward world and the inward are not finally separate, but interrelated, both understood that imagination not only unites us with Christ within us, but also, as part of one and the same realisation, with Christ in the world outside us. Thus Boehme declares, 'God must become man, man must become God; heaven must become one thing with the earth, the earth must be turned to heaven'.¹¹⁷ Through the imaginative life of the indwelling Christ, the distinctions of outward and inward disappear, revealing the ultimate unity and identity of the two.

In particular, imagination is vital, because it helps put us in touch with that which is other than ourselves, in the outside world, not least other people. Empathic, it connects us with other human beings. It is that in which, as Blake perceived, 'All/Human Forms' are 'identified':¹¹⁸

He who would see the Divinity must see him in his Children
 One first, in friendship & love; then a Divine Family, & in the midst Jesus
 will appear; so he who wishes to see a Vision; a perfect Whole Must see it in
 its Minute Particulars; Organized.¹¹⁹

As Boehme saw, '*there is but One God . . . when the veil is put away from thy Eyes, so that thou seest and knowest him, then thou wilt also see and know all thy brethren*'.¹²⁰ All 'men are but one man . . . God created only him, and the other creating he left to man'.¹²¹ When reason is too shut off from all of the other human faculties and capacities, it can abstract us from our humanity. As Blake puts it, in 'Attempting to be more than Man We become less'.¹²² Embodied imagination

115. *Jerusalem* pl. 4:7, 18–20, E146. 116. *Forty Questions* 7:24.

117. *Signatura Rerum* 10:52. 118. *Jerusalem* pl. 99:1–2, E258.

119. *Ibid.*, pl. 91:18–21, E251. 120. *Aurora* 11:58. 121. *Mysterium Magnum* 71:31.

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humanises us, places us very much in the world as human beings, and puts us in touch with all the possibilities that brings with it. And when this happens, *true* Reason can function. In his early work *All Religions are One*, Blake spoke of imagination as the ‘Poetic Genius,’ which he saw as

the true Man, and . . . the body or outward form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius . . . As all men are alike in outward form, So (and with the same infinite variety) all are alike in the Poetic Genius.¹²³

The all-embracing fecundity of the inward spiritual man is the source of the ‘infinite variety’ in the outward. Exploring our potential through imagination, Boehme and Blake both encourage and urge us to make new discoveries and to create new forms for the life of the spirit. Both worked against the circumscription of reality. For both, reality is inexhaustible and often lies at depths beyond surface appearance; and any predominant form of thought and understanding is only partial. In Blake’s words, there is ‘no Limit of Expansion . . . no Limit of Translucence’.¹²⁴ And for Boehme, ‘The word . . . which began with the beginning of the world, is still yet . . . creating’.¹²⁵

122. *Four Zoas*, Night 9, p. 135:21, E403. 123. *All Religions Are One*, E1.

124. *Jerusalem* pl. 42:35, E189. 125. *Mysterium Magnum* 10:56.



